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THE VICTORIAN SPIRIT.

MARGARET JOURDAIN.

MR. LYTTON STRACHEY'S study of the Victorian spirit in *Eminent Victorians* has a two-fold appeal, according to the publishers' summary, historical and biographical. It has more. The interest of these concise and searching studies in the difficult art of biography and the vigorous coloured and arresting manner of the historian is indeed not negligible, but the real aim of the book is propagandist and destructive. He exposes and brings to light some aspects of that singular epoch with which he is least in sympathy, the puzzled Protestantism of an Arnold, the astute Catholicism of a Manning, the unbridled mysticism of a Gordon. Mr. Strachey's portraits are not haphazard visions, as he describes them in the following disingenuous passage in his preface; nor is his choice of subjects solely determined by the "simple" motives of art and convenience:

I have attempted through the medium of biography to present some Victorian visions to the modern age. They are in one sense, haphazard visions—that is to say—my choice of subjects has been determined by no desire to construct a system or to prove a theory, but by simple motives of convenience and of art. It has been my purpose to illustrate rather than to explain. . . . In the lives of an ecclesiastic, an educational authority, a woman of action and a man of adventure, I have sought to examine and elucidate certain fragments of the truth which took my fancy and lay to my hand. That is what I have aimed at in this book—to lay bare the facts of some cases, as I understood them, dispassionately, impartially, and without ulterior intentions. To quote the words of a Master, *Je n'impose rien; Je ne propose rien; J'expose.*¹

Mr. Strachey's book has attracted a considerable degree of notice, in spite of the fact that it has no novelty in matter, no reversal of the accepted facts of the four biographies. The biographies appended to each study are not exhaustive; and he has chosen to exercise his art upon

¹ *Eminent Victorians*. By Lytton Strachey. London: Chatto & Windus, 1918. This book is referred to as *E.V.* in future references.

subjects—one would almost say patients—where in two cases recent and fully documented biographies exist.

It is an original work with no pretention to original research. Its author was not well-known, and had written no considerable book; it appeared in 1918 and its success was therefore the more remarkable, for in the closing year of the war, actors and spectators were alike strained to an unbearable pitch of attention. Mr. Asquith, who paid the book a generous compliment in his Romanes lecture, in saying that the prominent and potent personalities that form its subject were now in less danger of being forgotten, spoke of its style as subtle and suggestive. These are not fit words for the bold thrusts of Mr. Strachey, but the style is, in fact, its distinction. The book is in debt to Voltaire, and to Gibbon, on whom the French rationalists of the eighteenth century and a long residence in French-speaking Switzerland had left an ineffaceable mark. Either of these two masters of irony might have written the description of the fanatic Tien Wang who, "surrounded by thirty wives and one hundred concubines, devoted himself to the spiritual side of his mission"¹ and the ambiguous thunderstorm, "a manifestation of divine opinion," that broke over St. Peter's on the last day of the General Council of 1870.² It was this method of Gibbon's that caused Archbishop Whately to go out of his way in a note to his *Logic*, to make a pass at an author whom it was politic to depreciate whenever occasion served. "His way of writing," he says, "reminds one of those persons who never dare look you full in the face." Mr. Strachey's attack is also a flanking one. But while the method is so similar, the manner in the younger writer is in some respects an advance upon Gibbon's. Mr. Strachey's narrative is concise, brisk,

¹ *E. V.*, p. 221.

² "On July 18, 1870, the Council met for the last time. As the first of the fathers stepped forward to declare his vote, a storm of thunder and lightning suddenly burst over St. Peter's. All through the morning the voting continued and every vote was accompanied by a flash and a roar from heaven. Both sides, with equal justice, claimed the patient as a manifestation of the Divine Opinion" (*ibid.*, p. 93).

amusing and arresting; without Gibbon's blemish of un-failing grandiloquence. It is not possible to say of him, as Porson said of Gibbon, that "in endeavouring to avoid vulgar terms, he too frequently dignifies trifles, and clothes common thoughts in a splendid dress that would be rich enough for the noblest ideas. In short, we are too often reminded of that great man, Mr. Prig, the auctioneer, whose manner was so inimitably fine that he had as much to say on a ribbon as on a Raphael."

The Victorian age was in point of time a very long epoch, even if the outer fringes—the years before 1840 and after 1898¹—are set aside. Diverse in activities, busy and multiform, the singular period escapes and baffles the historian; it has lost lustre and become unfashionable rather than been dismissed and condemned. Mr. Asquith in his Romanes lecture speaks of the almost paradoxical incongruity between what may be termed its outward and its inward life,² and observes that the note of revolt was not the age's characteristic. The apparent outward peace was, it is true, disturbed by Chartism, the growth of the trades unions, the extension of the franchise, the strike as a weapon in the hands of labour; but there was revolution rather than peace on its inward life.

Its scientific achievement, its economic expansion,³ its potent and prolix literature are not weighed by Mr. Strachey; he does not mention the man who incarnated most completely the Victorian spirit, Macaulay. He has directed his attention to one characteristic, its preoccupation with religion. In 1840 Macaulay, who was anxious to launch a scheme of Whig Reform, was unable to get to business because of the obstacle of a religious tension or religious preoccupations. "Everything in heaven and earth was turned into a theological treatise and all the

¹ Queen Victoria, 1837–1901.

² The Right Hon. H. H. Asquith. *Some aspects of the Victorian Age*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press; London: Milford, 1918.

³ During the reign, the population of Great Britain doubled in number, but the accumulated wealth of the country increased at least three-fold, its trade six-fold.

people cared about was the nature of the Sacraments, the operation of Holy Orders, the visibility of the Church and baptismal regeneration." He goes down to Edinburgh to talk to his constituents about Corn Laws and Sugar Duties and the Eastern question and is met by such objections as "Yes, Mr. Macaulay, that is all very well for a statesman, but what becomes of the headship of your Lord Jesus Christ?"

Mr. Strachey shows the same preoccupations in the minds of his subjects; and for the purpose of studying the age he has chosen the personal and biographic rather than the historic method. He has chosen four persons for his gallery of life size portraits.¹ Each of these four was a religious person; and in no one case does he find that their religion is their strength. If these four persons (for one of whom at any rate, he shows some partiality), were candidates for beatification, this *advocatus diaboli* brings forward a hint here, and a suggestion there, that religion was their delusion, their worst feature, their undoing. The choice as subject, or victim, of Dr. Thomas Arnold, a man, as Martineau wrote, "respectable in scholarship, insensible to art, undistinguished in philosophy," seems to have been suggested by the absurdity of some of his opinions which Mr. Strachey has found useful as detail, to complete the picture of the age.

It is his part, to suggest, that this religious preoccupation induces or at any rate co-exists with a blindness to ethical and other real values. A Keble can observe that it would be a gain to this country were it vastly more superstitious, more bigoted, more fierce in its religion, than at present it shows itself to be;² an Arnold can tell a friend that: "Rather than have physical science the principal thing in my son's mind, I would gladly have him think that the sun went round the earth, and that the stars were so many spangles set in the bright blue firmament. Surely the only thing

¹ He includes smaller sketches of Gladstone, Sidney Herbert, Lord Hartington, Lord Cromer, Keble, Clough, Newman, Cardinal Wiseman and others.

² *E. V.*, p. 18.

needful for a Christian and an Englishman to study is Christian or moral and political philosophy.”¹ It is as characteristic of such a spirit that toleration goes to the wall. Arnold believed in toleration, within limits, that is to say, the toleration of those with whom he agreed. “I would give James Mill as much opportunity for advocating his opinion,” he said, “as is consistent with a voyage to Botany Bay.”²

Besides these expressions of limited sympathy, the point pressed home again and again by Mr. Strachey is the credulity, the literalism, the lack of historical spirit, the distrust of thought,³ the vain preoccupations of his four Victorians. Of these defects he gives most telling illustrations in Newman’s attitude towards the liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius and to the Santa Casa at Loreto, in Arnold’s difficulties with regard to the parentage of Abijah’s mother,⁴ and in Manning’s astonishing lecture on the *Present Crisis of the Holy See tested by Prophecy*.

“When we were there,”⁵ wrote Newman in a letter to a friend after his conversion, describing a visit to Naples and the miraculous circumstances connected with the liquefaction of St. Januarius’s blood, “the feast of St. Gennaro was

¹ *E. V.*, p. 194.

² *E. V.*, p. 197.

³ At Oxford, Thomas Arnold had “doubts”; he doubted the proof and the interpretation of textual authority. “In his perturbation Arnold consulted Keble. What was to be done? Keble’s advice was peremptory. Arnold was ‘bid to pause in his enquiries, to pray earnestly for help and light from above and turn himself more strongly than ever to the practical duties of a holy life.’ He did so and the result was all that could be wished. He soon found himself blessed with perfect peace of mind and a settled conviction.” *E. V.*, p. 184.

⁴ “In his view the scriptures were as fit a subject as any other book for free enquiry and the exercise of the individual judgment, and it was in this spirit that he set about the interpretation of them. He was not afraid of facing apparent difficulties, of admitting inconsistencies, or even errors in the sacred texts. Thus he observed that in Chronicles XI, 20 and XIII, 2, there is a decided difference in the parentage of Abijah’s mother—which he added, is curious on any supposition.” *E. V.*, p. 200.

⁵ *E. V.*, p. 28 and *seq.*

coming on, and the Jesuits were eager for us to stop, they have the utmost confidence in the miracle and were the more eager because many Catholics till they have seen it, doubt it. One father director here tells us that before he went to Naples he did not believe it, that is, they have vague ideas of natural means, exaggeration, etc., not of course imputing fraud. They say conversions often take place in consequence. It is exposed for the octave, and the miracle continues—it is not simple liquefaction, but sometimes it swells, sometimes boils, sometimes melts; no one can tell what is going to take place. They say it is quite overcoming and people cannot help crying to see it. I understand that Sir H. Davy attended every day and it was this extreme variety of the phenomenon, which convinced him that nothing physical would account for it, yet there is this remarkable fact that liquefactions of blood are common at Naples, and unless it is irreverent to the great Author of Miracles to be obstinate in the enquiry, the question certainly rises whether there is something in the air (mind, I don't believe there is—and speaking humbly and without having seen it, think it a true miracle—but I am arguing). . . . We saw the blood of St. Patrizia, half liquid, *i.e.* liquefying, on her feast day. But the most strange phenomenon is what happens at Ravello, a village or town above Amalfi. There is the blood of St. Pantaloon. It is in a vessel amid the stonework of the Altar. It is not touched, but on his feast in June it liquefies. And, more, there is an excommunication against those who bring portions of the True Cross into the Church. Why? Because the blood liquefies wherever it is brought. A person I know, not knowing the prohibition, brought in a portion, and the Priest suddenly said, who showed the blood, 'Who has got the Holy Cross about him?' I tell you what was told me by a grave and religious man."

After leaving Naples, Newman visited Loreto, and inspected the house of the Holy Family, which, as is known to the faithful was transported thither in three hops from Palestine. "I went to Loreto," he wrote, "with a simple

faith, believing what I still more believed when I saw it. I have no doubt now. If you ask me why I believe, it is because every one believes it at Rome, cautious as they are and skeptical above some other things, I have no antecedent difficulty in the matter. He who floated the Ark on the surges of a world-wide sea, and enclosed in it all living things, who has hidden the terrestrial paradise, who said that faith might move mountains, who sustained thousands for forty years in a sterile wilderness, who transported Elias and keeps him hidden till the end, could do this wonder also".¹

Arnold again, when told that the gift of tongues had descended on the Ivingites at Glasgow, was not surprised: "I should take it," he said, "merely as a sign of the coming of the day of the Lord."² The Coming of Antichrist is a subject congenial to the mind of Manning, and Mr. Strachey gives full weight to his detailed speculations upon this subject.

There is no passage in scripture, Manning pointed out relating to the coming of Christ more explicit and express than those foretelling Antichrist; it therefore behoved the faithful to consider the matter more fully than they are wont to do.³ In the first place, Antichrist is a person. "To deny the personality of Antichrist is to deny the plain testimony of Holy Scripture." And we must remember that "it is a law of Holy Scripture that when persons are prophesied of persons appear." Again, there was every reason to believe that Antichrist when he did appear, would turn out to be a Jew. "Such was the opinion of St. Irenaeus, St. Jerome, and of the author of the work *De consummatione Mundi* ascribed to St. Hippolytus, and of a writer of a commentary on the Epistle to the Thessalonians ascribed to St. Ambrose, of many others, who add that he will be of the tribe of Dan; as for instance St. Gregory the Great, Theodoret, Aretas of Caesarea and many more.

¹ *E. V.*, p. 35.

² *E. V.*, p. 198.

³ *E. V.*, p. 101.

Such also is the opinion of Bellarmine who calls it certain. . . . Lessius affirms that the Fathers with unanimous consent teach as undoubted that Antichrist will be a Jew. Ribera repeats the same opinion and adds that Aretas, St. Bede, Haymo, St. Amselm and Rupert affirm that for this reason the tribe of Dan is not numbered among those who are sealed in the Apocalypse. Our Lord has said of these latter times. 'There shall arise false Christs and false prophets, insomuch as to deceive even the elect'; that is, they shall not be deceived, but those who have not faith in the Incarnation such as humanitarians, rationalists and pantheists, may well be deceived by any person of great political power and success who should restore the Jews to their own land and people Jerusalem once more with the sons of the Patriarchs." Then Manning threw out a bold suggestion: a successful medium, he said, might well pass himself off by his preternatural endowments as the promised Messiah."

Manning went on to discuss the course of events which would lead to the final catastrophe. But this subject he confessed "deals with agencies so transcendent and mysterious, that all I shall venture to do will be to sketch in outline what the broad and luminous prophecies, especially of the Book of Daniel and the Apocalypse set forth; without attempting to enter into minute details which can only be interpreted by the event." While applauding his modesty one need follow Manning no further in his commentary upon those broad and luminous works, except to observe that "the apostacy of the City of Rome from the Vicar of Christ," and its destruction by Antichrist was, in his opinion, certain. Nor was he without authority for this belief. For it was held by Malvenda, who writes expressly on the subject and who further states as the "opinion of Ribera, Gaspar, Melus, Viegas, Suarez, Bellarmine, and Bosius that Rome shall apostasise from the faith."

The exposure to ridicule of the literalism carried into every day life, is not neglected by Mr. Strachey. He tells us, apparently innocently, that Cardinal Manning decided

to make his night prayers forty minutes instead of thirty minutes.¹ A resolution recorded in all seriousness by the Cardinal, together with his determination to use during Lent "no pleasant bread (except on Sundays and feasts) such as cake or sweetmeat," but adding the proviso "I do not include plain biscuits."² W. G. Ward's vow to abstain from music during Lent and his relapse³ are not omitted and the searchings of heart of Hurrell Froude are rescued from the dust of his diary.

"He was obsessed by the ideals of saintliness," writes Mr. Strachey of the latter, and convinced of the supreme importance of not eating too much. He kept a diary in which he recorded his delinquences and they were many. "I cannot say much for myself to-day," he writes on September 29, 1826; "Looked with greediness to see if there was a goose on the table for dinner and though what I ate was of the plainest sort and I took no variety, yet even this was partly the effect of accident and I certainly rather exceeded in quantity as I was muzzy and sleepy after dinner." And again, "as to my meals, I can say that I was always careful to see that no one else would take a thing before I served myself, and I believed as to the kind of food, a bit of cold endings, of a dab at breakfast, and a scrap of mackerel at dinner are the only things that diverged from the strict rule of simplicity." Such were the preoccupations of this young man.⁴

The Church is moving towards other problems and the various religious ideals and conceptions that Mr. Strachey illustrates so adroitly are more remote from the Churchman of to-day than Victorian scientific speculations from the scientist of to-day.

It is obvious that religious enthusiasm⁵ is little or noth-

¹ *E. V.*, p. 93.

² *E. V.*, p. 93.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵ "When a child Newman 'wished that he could believe the Arabian Nights were true.' When he became a man his wish seems to have been fulfilled." *E. V.*, p. 31.

ing to Mr. Strachey, and that Gordon's mystical theory of the relation between God and man, the Mahdi's Divine mission, the wild visions of the Taiping leader, the asceticism of Hurrell Froude, the doubts of Arnold, the speculations of Newman, are all equally valuable to the wise man. They may have, however, the human and dramatic interest of those mysterious impulses that may, interacting in queer complication,—hurry at last—so it almost seems—"the creatures of a puppet-show to a predestined catastrophe," or at any rate if they move men to no dramatic action, are peculiarly fitted for Mr. Strachey's diverting analysis.

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